Prince Scheherazade: PRINCE SCHEHERAZADE <span ...
by Eleanor M. Ingram
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Prince Scheherazade

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FAR above the prison clock struck five, a heavy, resonant chime that muffled the clank of keys and the shuffling feet in the corridor. The man in the other one of the twin cells in which the hallway ended made an impatient gesture, and leaned forward in eager listening. He heard the next door open, the officer's voice in a brief command, the fall of the closing lock, and presently silence. With a breath of relief he crossed the room and surveyed the wall which divided the two cells.

"Shall I?" he murmured, interrogatively. "Bah, why not? The arrival here is not so cheerful that one should fear to interrupt too abruptly."

It was already quite dark, but with the certainty of practice he went to the corner and put his hand on a small metal pipe that ran up a few feet from the floor, then curved sharply and disappeared in the wall. With a deft twist he lifted out a section just at the bend, and, kneeling, brought his head level with the little tube.

"Comrade and fellow prisoner!" he called, scarcely raising his voice above its usual tone. "I have a companion in there, perhaps"

"A startled cry answered him and the sound of a sudden movement.

"Oh, who is it? Who is speaking?" cried a voice of such utter terror and dismay that the sob which followed was not more feminine.

"A woman!" he gasped in stupefaction.

"Who spoke? Who is here?" was repeated in growing excitement and fear.

"Madame, no one is in your cell," he reassured her eagerly. "Madame, I ask your forgiveness from my heart; if I had not supposed the new prisoner a man I would never have been so abrupt. I am in the next room and so lonely I could not wait to hear another's voice. You will pardon me and let me speak to you tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes, monsieur. Please do not go yet; I am afraid." He heard the rustle of her dress. "I do not understand; how can you talk to me like this?"

"Mademoiselle, there is a pipe," he explained, involuntarily changing the title in tribute to the extreme youth of her voice, "for ventilation, perhaps, or forgotten tomorrow, a pipe that connects our two rooms. A month ago an unfortunate gentleman was there in your place and he discovered it. One cannot see, but one can speak. He nicknamed us Pyramus and Thisbe."

"You laughed?" she inquired, wonderingly.

"Mademoiselle——"

"You are not afraid, then? You have not been here long?"

"Eight months, mademoiselle."

"And I only one. I thought when they came for me today it was to set me free, but no; they only brought me here."

"The revolution cannot last always," he suggested gently. "Freedom must come some day. Perhaps, if you will let me, we may shorten the hours for each other. Permit me to present," the laughter crept into his voice again. "Anne Estein de Gerier, once upon a time Comte d'Estressac, age twenty-four, disposition angelic, appearance best ignored; mademoiselle, I kiss your hand."

"Monsieur," she protested, charmed into an echo of his gayety, "and I am Rosaure d'Yvon."

"And?"

"Age eighteen," she complied demurely, "disposition timid, appearance immaterial."

He laughed outright, delighted.

"Mademoiselle, I am the most selfish person in the world to be so glad you are here."

"There is no place in France where I would be safe," she replied sadly. "I have no one writing for me, nowhere to go. The convent is dispersed in which I was educated, and the aunt with whom I expected to live has gone to England."

De Gerier stifled the exclamation that rose to his lips as he recalled the Paris he had last seen.

"You are indeed better here," he said with earnest gravity.

"Yes, but I am so weary of the stone walls, the dark and gloom; some one is coming, monsieur!"

"Our supper," he explained. "Mademoiselle, will you tell me afterward when I may speak without annoying you?"

She did not answer and, fearing interruption, he rose.

"A day of days!" he explaimed, standing in the middle of his cell. "A day to be crowned with rosemary. And I who called prison monotonous!" He flung back his head with a little laugh, his dark eyes shining, his cheek flushed. "To have spoken once more to a woman, a demoiselle, to have been called once more monsieur instead of citizen; why, it is incredible fortune! When I think they might have put her in a hundred other rooms——"

The jailer, who entered, looked curiously at the irregular, brilliant face smiling at him in the light of the smoky lantern.

"You are merry citizen," he remarked sourly.

"An untroubled conscience, citizen," De Gerier retorted.

When the door was sut again he went eagerly back to the improvised speaking tube. But all was silent, even after the visitor's steps had quite died away. He waited an hour, two hours.

"She has fallen asleep," he assured himself, at last. "Tomorrow."

"You Here!"

The first gray light found him awake and waiting impatiently, but no sweet, whispering voice came to summon him. Suppose she had been taken away! At 10 o'clock he could remain quiet no longer and took the initiative himself.

"Mademoiselle," he called, daringly.

There was a faint cry of relief.

"Oh, I thought you would never come, monsieur," came the answer in swift reproach.

"Mademoiselle," he stammered, aghast, "but you were to call me. I feared to trouble you, to be a nuisance."

"Trouble me, here? And of course, I could not call you; one does not do those things. It was so dark and so long until morning."

"I am a clumsy animal, mademoiselle. If you knew how I longed to speak."

"I am listening," she said, with an attempted playfulness that could not hide the quiver of spent nerves.

"And of what may I speak?" he inquired. "Shall we tell stories, plan an escape, discuss politics? I will even recite poetry if you insist."

"Anything, so it is not of prisons or Paris," she replied wearily. "I—oh, I hate this place! Yes, tell me a story, what you will; only open the gates for an hour, monsieur."

De Gerier's expression changed, to sympathetic comprehension and he considered for an instant.

"I will try, mademoiselle. Let me show you what I see, what I never saw so clearly as since these dark walls shut around me. Imagine your hand rests on my arm as we go out together, down the old flight of steps.

"The chateau where I have taken you is all old; there on your left, the ocean curves way into the Gulf of Lyons, vividly blue; before you rise the slopes and distant peaks of the Pyrenees, blue also but soft with mist. One looks at those mountains and thinks of Roncesvalles and the twelve peers, of glittering Saracen chivalry and the fair Queen Bramidonie. The lone cry of a bird seems to wake the echo of Roland's horn. And one thinks rightly of these things, mademoiselle, for the knight who built this castle fell with Roland in that last stand against the Moors. Have you followed me to Gascony, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," she murmured, breathlessly.

"Then you feel the most wonderful air in the world, where the perfumes of ocean and forest meet. We are going down in the garden, not a toy garden like those of Versailles or Marly, nor a stiff Italian garden, but such a one as Belle Aude paced; wide lawns and stately trees. There are deer and little furry wild creatures that will come at your call. So many legends twine around here that no one can say he remembers them all. If you choose, mademoiselle we can come here every day and I will tell them to you, until you know why the water lilies in the pool grow stained with pink, and why the dragons writhe through every carving. Do you care to come, mademoiselle?"

"I am there now," was the quick response. "Tell me now, monsieur."

De Gerier leaned closer to the rough wall, his eyes bright and unseeing, caught in his own net of dreams.

"Very well, mademoiselle; and first I will tell you why these tiny crimson flowers in the grass are called the footsteps of the Lady Douce, and why I think of her when you speak."

Three hours later a rattle of keys reinforced the unheeded warning of the great clock and sent De Gerier hastily to the opposite side of his room.

"There is only you, citizen, who has the air of one who diverts himself in here," the jailer observed, surveying the heightened color and animated glance of his prisoner.

"I would doubtless find something diverting on the steps of the Place de Louis XV" De Gerier returned with mock gravity. "It is a habit, citizen."

"You will never look through the little window of the Place; some one outside is working for you," the man volunteered grudgingly.

De Gerier shot a keen look at him, his face darkening.

"Dubois?" he inquired.

"Citizen Dubois," the other corrected, as he withdrew.

There was no exultation in the glance that followed him, but rather perplexity and regret. After a while the prisoner went back to his post, sobered slightly.

"Have you come to take me again to fairyland, monsieur?" her clear voice greeted him. "What can I offer you in return for my morning's freedom? I am so dull; how can I do my share in this magician's work?"

"It is done already, mademoiselle. When you speak this sordid revolution, the sullen mob outside,—all change to the old courtly Paris. Your voice hangs these ugly walls with silk and gold."

"And at yours the walls vanish. I wonder, if ever we escape from here and meet outside, I wonder whether we would recognize each other from the tones we have listened to so closely."

"Mademoiselle, I would know your voice among all the voices in the world, and if we escape there will be no if to our meeting." He checked himself, fearing to frighten her.

"Will you not finish the legend of fair Alianor?" she suggested, after a tiny pause.

That night De Gerier slept with his head resting by the metal tube, so that he might hear mademoiselle if dread of the darkness and silence should come upon her. Perhaps it did, although she made no sign, for the next morning her response was less softly gay.

"Mademoiselle, have you ever dropped a stone into a clear pool?" De Gerier asked, after the first few sentences. "You have seen its beauty change, shivered into a hundred quivering ripples?"

"Yes."

"Your voice is changed like that; some grief has fallen on your heart, mademoiselle."

"I am childish," she confessed. "It is so dark, so gloomy this morning, I think it must be raining even in Gascony."

"Very well," he assented seriously, "it is raining, mademoiselle. See the long, straight lines of gray march across the wet lawns and the soft mist nestled on the mountainsides. We will stay indoors today, in the great rooms, rich with mellowed tints and restfully faded magnificence. We will choose the tower chamber where Sir Atmar shut the Spanish bride he stole from Cadiz, and where she used to watch for the robber-husband she learned to love so well. I will show you her portrait after a while, with its large dusky eyes and glowing cheeks. Have you come with me, mademoiselle?"

"Yes. Oh, I like the rain, monsieur."

The line between the shadow and the substance is not so very surely drawn, and for one who often crosses it the two may merge into a single debatable land. At the end of another day the chateau in Gascony was scarcely less real than the prison itself; at the end of a week sunlight and ocean winds swept airily through the two cells.

And outside, Paris, France, rocked in the hideous nightmare that preceded the people's awakening. Outside, men went to the guillotine for a careless word, while these two children of the court played their dainty game unheeded. De Gerier knew, and refused to consider.

Nearly three weeks after the coming of mademoiselle a new jailer replaced the old. The first morning he scrutinized his charge with some interest.

"Are you the Citizen Gerier?" he asked.

"That depends," De Gerier returned, in whimsical good humor. "If something very nice is waiting for Citizen Gerier, I am he; if it is the guillotine or transfer to some less palatial residence, certainly not."

The man shrugged his shoulders, indulgently amused.

"You are wise, citizen. But I think you will hear something this afternoon."

De Gerier drew a long breath as the door closed, his face deeply troubled. Twice the faint signal was given from the wall before he responded.

"You bade me call you, monsieur, when the jailor had gone from my room," she said brightly, even happily. "It has occurred."

"You are very good, mademoiselle," he replied.

She started, and he heard her sudden movement.

"Monsieur, something has happened; it is in your voice this time. What is wrong?"

"Nothing yet. I am afraid, mademoiselle, afraid they will set me free. I have a too officious friend out there, a former tenant on my land, who is original enough to remember kindness."

"I am very glad," she said bravely, after a moment whose terror and dismay he could well guess, "very glad, monsieur. And if you think at all of me, let it be to remember how wonderfully kind you have been and how my gratitude follows you."

"Mademoiselle, you are saying good-by!" he cried. "Why, it may never happen; a thousand things may help us. And if it does, surely you know I would not leave you here. I will work night and day, and I will bribe these animals; somehow I will take you from this place."

"Monsieur, you must attempt nothing so insane. It would mean the guillotine for us both."

"Are you afraid, mademoiselle?"

"Yes."

He laughed joyously.

"You tell a falsehood most inexpertly, mademoisells. You are not afraid, nor am I."

"I——"

He sobered himself with an effort.

"You are coming to Gascony. You are panting and trembling; oh, I am sure as if I could see you. Let us forget danger and trouble, come mademoiselle."

"For the last time, perhaps."

"No, no. If I dared to tell you——"

"Tell me of our chateau, monsieur. Make me see the sapphire Mediterranean, with the white birds poised over it."

"I hear and obey."

If the phantom of separation followed them into their enchanted land and darkened its sunshine, neither acknowledged the fact. Indeed, mademoiselle laughed more often than usual, and De Gerier was feverishly gay. But when in the late afternoon came the sound of many feet in the corridor, neither was quite unprepared.

"Good-by monsieur," whispered the sweet, unsteady voice.

De Gerier had just time to rise and meet his visitors as the door opened.

There were three of them beside the jailer, all strangers. The one in apparent command was an old man, who surveyed the prisoner doubtfully.

"Your name is Gerier, citizen?" he asked. "We are sent by the worthy citizen Dubois to remove you from here. A traveling carriage is waiting to convey you to your home on condition that you return no more to Paris. That is, if you are the right person; no one here seems to be certain. Are you Anne Gerier?"

Perhaps it was the unfamiliar sound of his name so shorn by the republican formula that gave De Gerier an idea so sudden, so illuminating that he almost cried out. There was no time for reflection; he clutched the opportunity.

"I?" he exclaimed, his sparkling dark eyes alight with merriment. "I, citizen? Do I look like a girl? I wish all joy to the citizeness Anne, but I fear liberty in petticoats would appeal to me little. Next door, citizen, next door; you are seeking my charming neighbor."

The men looked at each other, puzzled.

"I fancied we were to find a man," the other said, reflectively. "It is true Citizen Dubois did not say."

"Oh if there is any doubt take me. I will cheerfully adopt the name of Anne, or Marie, or any one you may select," de Gerier offered blithely. His heart was pounding madly; if only he could speak to mademoiselle.

"If there is a woman in the next cell"—he commenced, with an inquiring glance at the jailer.

"As for that, yes, citizen," the official replied. "But we will have to go back for the keys; I brought only these.

"Good! We will find out if she is Anne Gerier. I bid you good evening, citizen." He nodded stiffly to the pris-

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oner, who returned the salute with extreme courtesy.

They were hardly shut out into the hall before De Gerier was at the tube,

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!"

"Yes," she answered instantly.

"There is no time to waste. I have told them you are Anne Gerier and you must confirm it when they come to your room. Hush! you must. We dare not undeceive them now. They will send you home, mademoiselle, to our chateau; it is a reality, my own estate, a little corner the revolution cannot reach. You must wait for me there. Mademoiselle, it is the only way."

"And leave you in my place? Never, never!"

"If you do not, if you tell them I was planning an escape, it will be the guillotine for me and solitude for you."

"Why did you do it?" she cried in sharp reproach. "How had you the right, monsieur?"

"Because I love you, Rosaure, dear Rosaure. Because I can bear anything but to leave you here."

She broke into bitter sobbing.

"And you ask me to go free while you die! You force me to that, monsieur?"

"No, no. After you are gone I will tell Dubois and he will set me free also."

"You give me no choice. But to your chateau I will not go."

"You cannot help it," he exulted. "They will send you. Mademoiselle, wait there for me."

"No."

"Please——"

"No."

Down the corridor he heard returning footsteps and clenched his hands in breathless perplexity.

"Rosaure, take a message for me. Tell my steward, Marcil, that I bid him do for me what his ancestor did for Estien de Gerier. Promise, as you wish me to live."

The steps were very near now.

"I promise," she gasped. "Monsieur, forgive me; I care, too."

The last words were almost inaudible and his answering cry was drowned by the grating locks.

He pressed close to the wall in a desperate effort to hear what passed, but only a dull murmur of voices reached his ears. After a while the door opened and closed again; he heard the feet pass his cell and go on.

"Mademoiselle," he called, hoarsely; "Rosaure!"

No answer; then the first danger was passed. He waited half an hour and realized that she must be out of the building. When the bell rang seven, he knew she must have left Paris, and quivered in a paroxysm of relief and gratitude. So he followed her journey all night, pacing his cell in restless excitement. With difficulty he schooled himself to calm during the jailer's brief visits. The next day and the next passed the same way, until the number had elapsed that he counted necessary for her arrival; then the tension ended. The anxiety over, and with it De Gerier's fevered animation.

Exhausted, deluding himself with no such hope as he had given mademoiselle he faced a limitless captivity. Since Anne de Gerier had been sent to Gascony, Dubois would inquire no further. That he was ignorant of the deception was proved by its successful accomplishment, and to enlighten him might cause a search for mademoiselle.

After a while De Gerier reconstructed his chateau, this time as a background for a girl's image. He pictured her in all the beloved, familiar places, a slight figure which kept its face persistently turned away. Whether she was beautiful scarcely occurred to him; it was enough that she was herself. Sometimes the dread clung to him; it was that he might not find her at the chateau, that she might even be caught again in the vortex of destruction that swallowed all innocent and helpless things. But he resolutely refused the idea consideration.

The days moved with dragging slowness, but they moved.

Six months after mademoiselle's departure, when the government could no longer afford its prisoners the luxury of separate cells, but huddled them indiscriminately in masses, De Gerier was transferred to another room.

As he was being led through a long passage, a door was flung open and a short, plump man hastily emerged. He glanced casually at the party, then stopped with a cry of stupefaction.

"Monseigneur, you! You here?"

De Gerier raised his eyebrows warningly.

"That is word from a good citizen, my Dubois. Why, yes, it is I."

"But I thought you free last fall," the man stammered. "I thought——"

"Never think, mon ami. It is not your fault if I am here. I am free, by proxy," he threw back his head in the old laughing gesture.

Dubois wiped his brow and came closer.

"Monseigneur, who went from here?" he asked, imploringly.

"Anne de Gerier," his former master said, meeting his gaze steadily.

The other nodded in helpless acquiescence.

"Very good, monseigneur; but you?"

"I? I am a wraith, a phantom. Good-by, my Dubois; pray remember Anne de Gerier is deeply grateful."

He was still smiling as a turn in the corridor hid him from the little deputy's troubled eyes.

That night as De Gerier sat in the low, crowded room, sick with pity for the fellow prisoners he watched in their restless sleep, the jailer touched his shoulder.

"Come, citizen," he commanded.

Wondering, De Gerier silently obeyed. Outside the door two men met him.

"Orders from Citizen Dubois," one explained briefly.

A breath of fresh air blew across his face; the lights of a traveling carriage gleamed beyond the hall.

"Your passport," some one said, pressing a paper in his hand. "Your portmanteau is in the chaise. Probably you will wish to change your dress at the first inn. The driver is at your orders, citizen."

Another step and he was outdoors, under the stars he had not seen for more than a year. The carriage door closed sharply after him; he was leaving this frightful city. De Gerier clasped his fingers across his dazzled eyes.

"Dieu," he murmured, reverently. "Dieu."

After the somber prison, May in southern France; after the vicious frenzy of Paris, the dignity and repose of the mountains. Instead of the sullen, animal-eyed mob, the honest, cheerful peasant faces.

For 900 years the lords of this hidden corner of Gascony had sowed the harvest of good deeds that their descendants reaped now in rich abundance. All France might go mad, the king might mount the guillotine, but Anne De Gerier's domain remained his.

As soon as possible he escaped from the village and the passionate delight of welcome lavished upon him. They had all but embraced him, these dark-faced peasants; they called him every caressing name their soft language afforded.

Yet the one question on his lips he left unasked until he had reached the chateau and crossed again his own threshold. The steward, a grim man of 65, who had served three generations of De Geriers, followed in rigid composure, his eyes never leaving his master. De Gerier's wistful glance flashed vainly over the broad fur-strewn hall.

"And mademoiselle?" he asked in a low voice. "She came here?"

"Yes, monsigneur."

"And what did you do?"

The old man drew himself erect, his wrinkled face keenly proud as ever was De Gerier's own.

"Monseigneur," he declared, his voice clarion clear, "never yet sent one of your house a command to one of mine but it was obeyed. Mademoiselle is in the garden."

Light and color flooded De Gerier's face into the splendor of vivid youth; but with the fine respect which acknowledged Marcil's dignity as his own, he only held out his hand in the simple gesture understood by both.

At the door he paused and turned back.

"Was she very angry, Marcil?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"At first, monseigneur, very surprised and frightened. After she understood there was no other way she became quite gentle and reasonable. I opened all the chateau and she chose for her own the tower suite where hangs the portrait of monsigneur as a boy as that madame, the late comptesse, painted. Suzon, the daughter of Francois, whom I brought from the village to be her maid, says she often studies it. A most lovely lady, if monsigneur permits me to say so. Already she is beloved in Estressac, where she goes sometimes to play with the little children or visit the good cure. It is perfectly safe; no one in monseigneur's village would allow his betrothed to escape."

"Then you do not think she has been unhappy?"

"Unhappy? No, monseigneur. She reads or walks in the park or works some curious embroidery. Sometimes she deigns to talk with me, being naturally interested in what I can tell of monseigneur. Suzon and I sent for all things needful to a lady."

"Good Marcil!" his master exclaimed, with laughter and emotion struggling in his boyish voice.

He went out—out on the wide gray stone steps down which he had led her in fancy. The sloping lawns stretched smoothly away; on his left the dimpled ocean, cobalt blue, before him rose the amethyst hills. Something white was moving under trees in their pale spring foliage. He sprang forward eagerly.

His tread was almost noiseless on

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the soft turf, but she heard and turned to face him, a slight figure whose drooping head was crowned with golden brown that glinted in the sunshine. Perhaps she had caught some echo from the village, for the expression on the lovely, sensitive face was not all surprise. Opposite her he paused, radiant.

"Mademoiselle," he said, softly, "ah, mademoiselle."

Her eyes remained hidden behind the long lashes, even her slim throat was stained with rose.

"Mademoiselle, have I offended so deeply you cannot pardon? If you knew how I have hungered for your voice; how often I have rested my head against the dear, absurd hole that still seemed to keep an echo of music! Please, mademoiselle——"

"I am more happy than I can express, monsieur, to know you are at liberty," she murmured.

"So little? Mademoiselle, I wish we were both in prison."

"Oh!"

"Mademoiselle, temper justice; I am guilty."

She looked up suddenly; in her eyes met the deepest tints of ocean and hills.

"You have kept me in your house all these months, monsieur; how can I see you and not think of it? The very dress I wear is yours, your gift. I have no right to be angry when you have spent this time in prison, in my place; I am grateful, but you must understand? Surely you understand that I must go now, at once."

He smiled, regarding her.

"When I asked you to give that message to Marcil, mademoiselle, you did not know the story of Estien de Gerier."

"Or I would never have delivered the message."

"Do you know it now?"

"Partly," she admitted reluctantly.

"When Estien was forced to leave for the crusades and bade his steward keep the demoiselle Constance prisoner until his return, it was because he loved her, because he feared some chance might snatch her from him during the long absence. If love is an excuse I can claim it."

She remained silent, her head bent.

"Mademoiselle, when Estein returned and tried in his poor way to say how much, how earnestly he loved her, did Constance pardon him?"

"You know the legend, monsieur," she answered faintly.

"I have forgotten."

Slowly his imperious glance drew her eyes to his.

"Did she forgive him, Rosaure, love of mine?"

"I think she could not help it," she confessed.